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SUBJECT: REACTIONS TO FIDEL,S RESIGNATION -- FEAR, HOPE,
AND SKEPTICISM

Classified By: DCM JLWILLIAMS, REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

1.(C) Summary: Today,s announcement by Fidel Castro that he will step down as President and Commander-in-Chief after next Sunday's election was received calmly by the Cuban people, who do not expect much in the way of short-term change. In the longer-term, however, people vary considerably in their enthusiasm for change, from those who would welcome any alteration in their current condition, to those who fear losing what they already have. Still others, including most declared dissidents, point to Fidel's decision to remain at the head of the Cuban communist party as evidence that the day,s events signify little if any change at all.
End Summary.

12. (C) On Tuesday, February 19, in lieu of yet another installment in the series of "reflections" by their long-time leader, readers of Granma were greeted by a full front-page "mensaje" from Fidel Castro in which he stated that he would 'neither aspire to nor accept the positions of the president of the council of state or commander-in-chief.' The announcement was received calmly by the Cuban people, who have learned not to expect much in the way of short-term change.

13. (C) The announcement did come as a surprise, however. While there was a noticeable build-up of Cuban state police and security presence over the weekend in parts of Havana, most observers attributed it to a tour de Cuba bicycle race that was passing through town. There were no mobilizations of reserves, no reports of civil disturbances, and no indicators of mass migration (although high winds and choppy seas may also have played a role in discouraging potential rafters). On the whole, Cubans discussed the announcement in discrete terms as they continued on with their daily lives.

14. (C) There was considerable disagreement among Cubans as to what, if anything, the day,s events signified for their futures, as well as the degree of enthusiasm with which they embraced the idea of possible change. Perhaps predictably, among the most skeptical were declared dissidents such as Marta Beatriz Roque, Vladimiro Roca, and Jorge Luis Garcia Perez (Antunez). As did many others, MBR pointed to Fidel,s decision to remain at the head of the Cuban Communist Party (CP) as evidence that the day,s events signified that little if any change would come at all, since article 5 of the Cuban constitution placed the CP as "the highest leading force8 in the country. Antunez believed the

announcement presaged &(more of the same, since Raul has blood on his hands." Lead Dama de Blanco Laura Pollan stated that Fidel will still rule as long as he lives, no matter what he may say or write to the contrary. Independent journalist Jorge Olivera ventured that some moderate improvements in the economy) especially the agricultural sector) were possible, but not much else. He added that the future will be like a faucet, they will be careful with the flow of change to make people happy but not empowered to demand political change.

¶5. (C) Others expressed a degree of hope. Independent Librarian Roberto de Miranda said his neighbors welcomed the news, hoping that it would bring improvements to their daily lives and that expectations were high. A university professor contacted by USINT stated flatly that any change would be welcome, and that Fidel realized he had become an obstacle for the country and that power must be passed on to others. "With Fidel one has to recognize that he has always been a strategist and this is part of his final strategy." Even Antunez said the announcement represented an important moment that should not be dismissed, and that perhaps the few moderate elements within the ruling elite would be able to express their views more freely, eventually pointing out that "the King has no clothes" as a first step toward significant change.

¶6. (C) Cuban television did a series of person-on-the-street interviews in which all respondents uniformly praised Fidel, noting that "he will continue to be our leader, our commander, and we will continue constructing socialism," and "he is the man who has made us think and reflect," and that "nothing will change, we will have the same love for our country and President Bush has to know that our revolution will never end."

¶7. (C) One student of information science interviewed by USINT, however, may have spoken for a silent yet significant group who view any change with considerable trepidation.

"Here we will continue to be afraid, with or without Fidel. We are all afraid of losing what little we have. I could also lose my career. I hope this changes, that the changes that come are those we all need. But I don,t want a society like the United States. I want a society that is still Cuban, very Cuban, but different from the one we have now."
PARMLY